



Autumn vegetables

As the days grow shorter and the nights get colder the chicory 'Rossa di Treviso' turns a deep, dark crimson.

Autumn in this garden creeps in during September and is here with a vengeance by the end of the month. But those few weeks of changeover from summer to autumn can be amongst the most beautiful of the whole year.

It is one of my favourite times in the garden. Along with lots of good flowers and masses of ripening fruit and vegetables, this fading elegance gives the garden dignity, and the knowledge that every fine day is one of the last makes them precious.

But there is a major shift in this garden during October, going from days that feel like late summer to some of the coldest, most miserable weather that we get. The Orchard takes centre stage but there is a great deal happening in the Vegetable Garden too. However, it is never an easy time because the weather is so variable. Until the mid-1990s, all autumn work was geared towards keeping as much going as

possible until the first hard frosts – which could happen at any time from September onwards and were inevitable by the beginning of November. But increasingly, the pattern is towards very wet, mild autumns. Some years it is very wet indeed, with extensive flooding over a third of the Vegetable Garden and we cannot set foot – literally – on any bare soil. Work has to wait. Other years it can be drier and remarkably mild, so everything – including the weeds and grass – keeps growing well past any expected date.

In the Vegetable Garden, the last of the tomatoes are still being harvested and chicories, sweetcorn, leeks, squashes and

pumpkins are all coming into their peak. The latter are one of the real signifiers of autumn. The fruits of the squashes have been swelling steadily since late summer although until autumn they are mostly hidden by their vast leaves. But when the leaves start to die back, they reveal the range of fruits in all their splendour, sitting amongst the decaying foliage like monstrous eggs. The French beans keep going to the first frosts, as do the late salad crops.

But always, inevitably, as the season progresses, we fast run out of light, and at the end of October the clocks go back and it is dark by 6pm. This is a bad day. From then on it is sharply downhill to the shortest day on 21 December.

Chicory

I have become very keen on chicory, both as a grower and an eater. For a few years I set out to grow every possible variety that I could lay my hands on, but back then – in the early 1990s – seeds were hard to come by and it involved a trip to the market in Venice to buy a good selection. Venice is the centre of the Veneto, which in turn is the centre of chicory growing in Italy and thus the world. They really understand chicory in that corner of Italy and celebrate the dozens of different available varieties in a hundred culinary ways.

Winter is their eating season although judicious timing can ensure a supply of some kind of chicory year round. A good head of a radicchio like 'Palla Rossa' cut in November will have been sown the previous March and been growing vigorously since May.

In October we go from late-summer days to cold and miserable weather

All chicory has two stages of growth although some make more of a performance of it than others. Stage one is to sprout green foliage. In chicories like endive or puntarelle this is very edible although many types of endive are pretty bitter unless blanched in some way. Gathering the heads up and tying them with twine is effective although makes a perfect home for slugs if the heads are damp. In practice I grow them close enough together so each plant blanches its neighbour – and in any event, the frisée varieties are pleasantly piquant rather than mouth-wrinklingly bitter.

The red chicories and varieties like 'Grumolo Verde' or 'Sugarloaf' have a first batch of leaves that are thick, tough and inedibly bitter. Their job is to feed the root that is busily establishing itself underground. But in August, as the nights start to get a little cooler, this foliage, which can be extremely profuse, slows down and sometimes shows signs of turning red. At this stage I start to remove the exterior leaves by the handful to allow light and air to circulate, otherwise chicory is very prone to becoming a slimy brown mush if it gets too wet. Gradually, through August and September, I remove all the foliage (and there is a lot – providing a generous side benefit of compost material), which is then replaced by much sweeter, more palatable leaves. In 'Grumolo Verde' they go from upright spathes to a rosette. In 'Palla Rossa' or

'Rossa di Verona' they become the tight red ball that we generically call radicchio (although in fact that term refers to all red chicories of whatever shape) and in 'Rossa di Treviso', they regrow as deep alizarin crimson fronds.

Mind you, they all have that lovely bitter tang that makes chicory so addictive. It is a grown-up taste, as far removed from the



sweet pulp of fast food as fino sherry, capers or olives. It is certainly an acquired taste but once gained, is never lost and is equally good when the chicory is raw or cooked. I love a salad of a good radicchio like 'Rossa di Verona' or 'Palla Rossa' with avocado and tomato, the crunchiness of the leaves offsetting the slipperiness of the avocado and the sweetness of the tomato balancing the bitterness of the chicory. Pasta with wilted chicory, Parmesan and a little garlic is extremely good too.

I always start chicory off in plugs and transplant them when the roots are sufficiently developed so they can be lifted clear from the plug without collapsing but are not in any way rootbound. This is a fine line and in my experience there is usually about a ten-day window for this, so you have to keep checking. Over the years I realise that I can now tell from the appearance of the growing plants but if in any doubt, just gently ease a seedling from its plug and check the roots.

Chicory can be sown direct but the one year I did this, I found that I was thinning to increasingly wide spacing because of the vigour of the first flush of foliage. Better to start with plants a good 23cm (9in) apart and let them grow strong and uncluttered to make maximum root development.

The leaves of radicchio 'Palla Rossa' make a delicious bittersweet tight ball of crimson and white leaves. But you often have to remove a layer of outer green leaves that can form a slimy carapace if they get too wet.

They are very hardy and can take frost down to about -10°C (14°F) but cold and rain are a bad combination for them and that is standard winter fare here so I always cloche as many as I can simply to provide umbrellas to keep them dry.

Harvest them by cutting the top-growth back to a stub with a knife and new leaves will invariably regrow, each plant giving at least two harvests and in some years three, with new leaves reappearing in spring. However, very hot or very dry weather will cause them to send up flower stems and bolt, and unless these are removed as soon as you see them, the plant is lost for eating purposes.

Turnips

Turnips are closely related to cabbage, oilseed rape and radish, and should be grown as part of the brassica rotation in a veg plot— usually following legumes such as peas or beans (see page 293). They are prone to all the same ailments that cauliflowers, cabbages and sprouts suffer from, such as cabbage root fly (see page 361) club root and predation by the cabbage white caterpillars (see page 357). Having said that, they are very easy and quick to grow given the right conditions. They like a rich, well-drained soil that is neutral to alkaline.

The winter crop is sown from midsummer onwards and is hardy enough to take all but the coldest weather as well as relishing the wet, but I think turnips should be eaten when young and not left in the ground too long. This, for me, makes them an autumnal crop rather than a winter one.

Chicory is an acquired taste but is equally good whether the chicory is raw or cooked

Whenever you sow or eat them, they are best sown where they are to grow and carefully thinned as soon as the leaves can be handled. This is a fiddle but will encourage good root formation. The summer crop can be as close as 7.5–10cm (3–4in) apart but the maincrop ones will need up to 23cm (9in) between them.

If your soil is acidic it is a good idea to lime it a few weeks before sowing. But never add lime and manure at the same time. Best to add manure or compost at least a couple of months before liming. Turnips do best with a steady supply of moisture and it is best to grow them fast and harvest after about ten weeks, when the turnips are anything from golf- to cricket-ball size.

We tend to think of turnips as primarily white, with 'Snowball' a popular variety, but they come in all shapes, sizes and colours, from black to purple to yellow. Some, like 'Tokyo Cross' or 'Bianca Lodigiana', are flattened like hockey pucks and others, like 'Navet des Vertus Marteau', are long and slim. But all are sweet and tender when eaten young and I like them simply boiled, then glazed in butter and served whole.

Turnip leaves are very rich in calcium and are good steamed as you might cook spinach. You can cut the tops for eating and they will resprout for a second and even third harvest, and then the root can be dug and eaten as normal.

Celeriac

Although I often preach the virtue of only growing what you like to eat and eating everything that you grow, the truth is always more complex than that.

Vegetables seem to fall into two camps. There are those that any keen gardener or allotmenteer will always grow whether they are a kitchen favourite or not. I guess broad beans, lettuce, cabbages, carrots and potatoes fall into that category, along with half a dozen others, particular to all of us. Although everything gets eaten, these are vegetables driven as much by a horticultural desire to do the right thing – by yourself as much as any kind of peer pressure – as by culinary imperative. But there are other vegetables that you grow solely for their virtue on the table. For myself, these include asparagus, chicory, many different lettuces, garlic, tomatoes, rocket, Florence fennel and, most emphatically, celeriac.

Although celeriac has become surprisingly trendy over the past few years, it is never going to be the star of the show. There is no dramatic revelation when you lift it as there is with new potatoes or carrots. The swollen base is warty with root and can be, I admit, disappointing. Many flatter to deceive

I like the fact that celeriac cannot possibly be sold as ‘instant’ food – you have to give it your time and attention

with a seemingly generous top of a good-sized ball lurking in the soil, which reveals itself to be the top of a flattish plate rather than the melon-sized monsters that shops sell, and when trimmed of its tentacles of root, it is whittled down to something like a squashed golf ball.

But I blame my inadequacies as a gardener for this. As a rule, celeriac demands little other than rich soil and a good supply of water, then reliably and quietly grows into a workable vegetable. I say ‘workable’ because its realm is the kitchen, not the garden or show bench. With the stalks, foliage and roots all lopped off and scrubbed under a cold tap with a good bristly brush to get in all the crevices, it emerges like an overgrown truffle – and in my opinion, much nicer to eat than any truffle.

I like the fact that it cannot possibly be sold as ‘instant’ food. You have to give it your time and attention, although this is hardly demanding. It needs peeling – but the peel can be dried and threaded on cotton and kept to flavour stocks and soups – then chopping and cooking. As well as being delicious roasted or puréed (the secret is to add *lots* of cream), celeriac adds an earthy, musky taste to soups, stews and mashed potato.

In the same way that celeriac is truculently reluctant to be fast in the kitchen, it takes its time in the garden. I sow the seeds, which, like celery, are tiny, in March, scattering them thinly on a seed tray (do not cover them) and then prick them out into plugs. These then get potted on into 7.5cm (3in) pots but if you

live in a milder area than here, they could go out in April and the potting on could be avoided. However, although they are quite hardy, it is a mistake to put them out too early because they will not grow in cold soil and whilst they sit, waiting like the rest of us for spring warmth, the slugs lay into them. So I wait until mid-May or even June before planting them out a generous 30cm (12in) apart in blocks or rows.

I weed and water regularly and that is it until late summer when I start to remove any foliage that is not dead upright. There is no science to this but I probably make two or three passes to get as much light and air as possible to the ground around them. This is primarily to make sure that energy is going to the root rather than into growing extravagant foliage, but also means that rainfall reaches the soil and therefore the roots rather than the canopy of leaves..

One very cold winter my celeriac had to be harvested with a pickaxe for our customary Boxing Day chestnut and celeriac soup, but they were useable when thawed. However, they should be protected from extreme cold. I vacillate between mulching them well with straw, which is good in a mild winter but encourages slugs, and lifting them and bringing them into a frost-free shed, although they very easily dry out. In my parents’ day we stored celeriac, along with carrots and potatoes, in a clamp – piling them in a little mound which was covered with straw and then a layer of soil, beaten smooth. Perhaps I need to resurrect that technique.



Celery

For years I grew trench celery with a kind of evangelical zeal. This involved digging a wide trench, manuring the bottom and planting the young celery plants that I raised from seed along it. Then I would earth them up and gradually refill the soil around their growing stems until the tops of the foliage grew in green tufts from a neatly patted-down earthen ridge. This kept the light from the growing stems and thus blanched them, making them sweet and delicious when carefully extracted from their grave. It was a symbol of the ‘proper’ old-fashioned gardening I was brought up on and I convinced myself that the results tasted better than any alternative. Self-blanching celery was a kind of con trick, an American import that cheapened and degraded the noble art of celery growing. Yes, I was being pompous and absurd but let he who is without sin ... But worse than the charade

Self-blanching celery planted in a grid so that as they grow and mature, each plant will blanch and be blanched by its neighbours.

I was playing out was that the resulting celery was nearly always pretty poor stuff.

If you have very free-draining sandy soil, then trench celery is viable but this is thick Herefordshire clay and slugs loved the damp earth-wrapped stems. Celery leaf mining fly often scorched the leaves and added a bitter tang to the stems. Carrot fly (see page 320) took the odd break from my carrots to have a munch, and fungal problems blotched the leaves though do not affect the stems.

Then in 2010 I was away for great chunks of the summer, filming gardens in Italy, and my seed tray of trench celery was left unwatered and died. Only a tray of self-blanching ‘Tall Utah’ happened to be ready when I was home and so got pricked out and then planted out at the right time.

Over the years I have always sown my celery seed – which is truly tiny – in a seed tray as thinly as possible and then transplanted the seedlings into plugs. It would probably make more sense to sow directly into plugs but you would have to thin out nine-tenths of the seedlings from each plug and it seems too wasteful. I then grow them on in a cold frame until they are about 10–15cm (4–6in) high, harden them off and plant them out in a grid.

I did all that in 2010, hoed them perhaps three or four times, and that was it. I did not water them, feed them or do anything beyond forking in 2.5–5cm (1–2in) of compost before planting out. But the resulting crop was better in every respect than anything I had so laboriously grown before. Since then I have stuck to self-blanching varieties and had no problems.

Celery is a hungry crop and the ground’s ability to hold water will influence the success of the final harvest. As with any plant, be it edible or decorative, knowledge of its original habitat is the most useful guide as to how best to grow it. Celery occurs in Asia and Europe in marshy, boggy ground so any organic material will help replicate the plant’s basic needs. If you dig the trench in March, there is time to grow a crop of ‘Tom Thumb’ or ‘Little Gem’ lettuce on the ridges made from the trench’s spoil, as it will not be needed until July for the first earthing up of the celery.

Self-blanching celery is germinated and raised just like trench celery but planted out in a block, with about 30cm (12in) space in every direction. The wider the planting, the bigger the plants. The idea is that each plant shields its neighbour and only the exterior ones need blanching with brown paper or straw wrapped about the stalks. Blanching is not just cosmetic (although most people apparently find white celery more appealing than pink or green) but also reduces any bitterness. Straw, if used, has the added advantage of acting as insulation against the first mild frosts.

When people talk about celery being ‘stringy’, they are referring to the wisps of tough tissue that lie along the length of the stalk, that can get stuck between the teeth and are generally regarded as a disadvantage. But the strings are the pathways that carry the nutrients to and from the leaves. This means that so-called ‘stringless’ varieties are likely to be less robust or large than others.



Florence fennel

Florence fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare* var. *azoricum*) or *finocchio* has evolved – with a lot of help from breeders – from the ordinary fennel herb to a vegetable. The base is swollen and forms an overlapping succession of layers like a bulb.

It is not an easy vegetable to grow but worth the effort as it is delicious, either raw or cooked, stores quite well and is, to me, an essential taste of late summer and early autumn.

The problem with growing it lies in its propensity to bolt before the bulbs swell out to any appreciable size, especially if you sow before midsummer as it is very sensitive to changing day length. The plant develops a hard core – rather like a bolting leek – leaving just the outer layers of the base edible. Ideally one should try and grow it as fast as possible. Any check at any stage in its growth seems to activate a hair trigger and set it bolting.

You can sow it direct – and I have done this with some success, sowing as late as mid-July – but I usually grow it in plugs in the greenhouse which I then plant out in late July or the beginning of August or, if space is not available, pot on into a rich compost mix in 7.5cm (3in) pots. The important thing is not to let it become remotely rootbound in the plugs as this will trigger bolting just as they get established in their vegetable bed – which might be a month later. I plant them out in rows at 23cm (9in) spacing, watering them in very thoroughly and including them in the watering regime with the celeriac and celery that get a good soak once a week. They can be left in the ground until the first hard frost rots them.

I grow ‘Argo’, which is fairly resistant to bolting so can be sown earlier in the summer, and ‘Romanesco’, which is very large and good for a later crop that will continue well into October.

Chard

Chard is one of our favourite vegetables and although it is placed here amongst the autumn vegetables, in fact we try and have some growing for most of the year. This is, luckily, not hard to do as it is very hardy both against winter cold and summer drought, and if cut regularly, will go on producing fresh leaves from what seems to be a completely wrecked stump of stem.

It is a member of the beet family and thus related to spinach and beetroot, and the wonderfully glossy leaves do look like monstrously enlarged versions of both its cousins. The stems are celery-like in texture

The trick to get Florence fennel to form a generous bulbous base or the leaves is to grow it fast and not let it dry out, get cold or rootbound – all of which will trigger it to bolt.

A head of celery ready for harvest.



if not in taste, which is delicate, subtle and delicious. The leaves, which are invariably cooked having been stripped from the stems, are like a slightly coarser, more robust spinach and make a counterbalance to any meats, eggs or cheese. Swiss chard has pure white stems and great green leaves and is, to my mind, superior in taste to all other variations, but ruby chard is beautiful enough for any flower border. Rainbow chard is, as the name suggests, multi-coloured, and 'Bright Lights' has brilliant yellow stems. All are good to eat.

The great thing about chard is that it has two quite separate parts, both very good and both very different. The French value the stems over the leaves and the British the opposite, but both are tasty. There is an excellent dish of chard stems and mussels cooked in milk and we make a pasta sauce from chard stems, cheese and cream. The leaves are used like spinach, adding a slightly sharp but never acidic element to a dish, good on their own but better when either a sweet or savoury flavour is added to them. At the moment I like chard best with chilli

Young ruby chard in midsummer. These will grow into substantial plants that will last until the following spring and provide three or more flushes of green leaves and bright red stems.



– but then I like almost anything with chilli. If chilli is not your thing, then try the leaves with any combination of anchovy, garlic or pine nuts. They also make a surprisingly good dessert with currants, apricots or apples. Moroccan cooking combines all this to make the stunning *pastilla* pastries filled with pigeon, currants, chard and onion wrapped in sweet filo pastry dusted with cinnamon. Writing that down makes me want to flee British wintry gloom and eat *pastilla* in Marrakech. If all that is too fancy, then try it with eggs. My wife, Sarah, makes a lovely chard frittata which somehow manages to be light and yet more substantial and more satisfying than a spinach version.

Swiss chard has nothing to do with Switzerland although the name has stuck for the past hundred years or so. The Ancient Greeks bred red chard whilst the Chinese record growing it in the seventh century, Swiss chard (although without the Swiss bit) is recorded in Britain as early as 1596 and a red-stemmed variety is mentioned in Gerard's *Herbal* from the same period.

The seeds can be sown direct but I prefer to sow them in plugs or blocks, restricting them to one seed per unit, growing them on and hardening them off before planting out at 23cm (9in) spacing. Once established, they are very drought-resistant but do best in a rich, but well-drained soil. Being biennials they will only go to seed in the first growing season if they are distressed, so the consistency of the water supply is as important as its quantity. If some do start to bolt, then I cut the central stems down to the ground and give them a soak.



Squashes and pumpkins

All pumpkins are squashes but not all squashes are pumpkins. Pumpkins have hard skins or rinds that mean they can be stored, often for months, if dried in the sun but many squashes have thinner skins and some – the summer squashes such as courgettes – cannot be stored as they never develop a skin thick enough to prevent the ripening process from becoming putrefaction.

Squashes and pumpkins are American of course, grown initially for their seeds and the utility of their skins as bowls, although it did not take long for someone to cook the flesh and find it good. Thanksgiving celebrations on the fourth Thursday in November depend upon the two staples of the New England wild that got the Pilgrim Fathers through the first winters – turkey and squashes.

If I had to grow just one type of squash it would be acorn squash as they taste fantastic, grow well and make such beautiful objects, with their elegant, fluted shape. They come in orange, yellow, blue-black and green, and when you hold them they feel more like a stone sculpture than a vegetable. But all the Hubbards, Butternuts and varieties like 'Turk's Turban', 'Rouge Vif d'Étampes', 'Uchiki Kuri', 'Musquée de Provence' (a ravishing orange colour) are also lovely, rollicking, buxom things and given enough space, I would grow scores. I did once. It was fun, if a little crowded.

I sow my seed in 7.5cm (3in) pots, two to a pot, in early May, putting the pots onto a heated mat, although a warm windowsill or greenhouse should do fine. If both seeds germinate, I remove one seedling. If the squash is a small variety like 'Little Gem' or 'Jack be Little', then it can stay in the same pot but if it is a

I grow my squashes vertically on a frame made from chestnut stakes woven with hazel bean sticks. This takes less space and exposes the ripening fruits to more sun. These are 'Red Kuri' and are ideal for this way of growing as they do not get too big and heavy.

big'un, like 'Hundredweight' or 'Golden Hubbard', then I pot it on to a larger container so the roots can reach out.

Keep them in a warm, sheltered place – a cold frame, as ever, is ideal – before planting out at least 90cm (36in) apart – and ideally three times that. But you must do this when, and only when, the soil is warm to touch. In this garden that is usually not before mid-June and often I wait until early July. Planting them out any earlier than mid-June in my neck of the woods is asking for trouble. The risk of a cold night is too great. This stops them in their tracks and the slugs and snails tuck in, eating the stems where they touch the ground and sometimes gnawing right through them, although they only cause real harm when the plants are not actively growing – which is usually in the first few cold weeks after planting out too early.

Before planting I always dig out a hole and fill it with compost which I then cover back over with soil, using the excess to create a raised ring or saucer around the planting hole. This helps contain water and funnel it to the roots. I give each plant a good soak once a week over and above any rain we have – and we have lots of rain!

If you have a slow compost heap, then this is the ideal place to grow a pumpkin. They love it and, as long as they are watered regularly, they grow with extra enthusiasm, as well they might.

If you have plenty of space, then they will sprawl across the ground, each plant covering yards by the end of summer, but I have taken to growing my squashes up a specially built frame and this works very well. Because they are so rampant and the

squashes become heavy, I use 2.5m (8ft) chestnut fencing stakes interwoven with a trellis of hazel bean sticks. I think it looks good and it means that I can grow three times as many plants in the same space – and the fruits, raised up off the ground as they are, ripen better and never get attacked by slugs or snails.

Other than slugs and snails, the only other problem that pumpkins face is powdery mildew, which is nearly always caused by the plant being too dry. It will manifest itself with a pale grey mould on the leaves which will then brown and die. Remove the affected leaves and never stint on the water.

Early frosts will reduce the foliage to blackness and if it is very wet, it is a good idea to place the fruits on a tile or some straw to raise them off the damp soil. The more sun the fruits get, the harder the skins will be and the better they will store. They should be harvested by carefully cutting the stem so that 5–7.5cm (2–3in) remain. This will stop any neck rot. I try and harvest when the forecast is good so that they can stay outside on a table for a few days to get as much sun as possible.

They need to be stored somewhere dark and dry where there is plenty of air circulation and the temperature holds between 5°C (40°F) and 10°C (50°F). Although they might feel heftily indestructible, treat them gently as they will keep much better unbruised.

My favourite varieties:

Pumpkins: 'Musquée de Provence', 'Turk's Turban', 'Jack be Little'

Squashes: 'Uchiki Kuri', 'Golden Hubbard', 'Waltham Butternut'



Sweetcorn

Like asparagus, sweetcorn taste so much better fresh than anything that you can buy. This is because as soon as they are picked from the parent plant the sugars start to convert to starch and after a few hours, that deliciously light sweet taste is replaced by a blanket mealy flavour. Still good but nothing like as good as they can be eaten fresh from the garden.

The seeds are sown in May in 7.5cm (3in) pots and planted out in July. There is no need to be earlier than this as they need hot days and warm nights to grow well. I often underplant them with courgettes and dwarf beans, which is the ancient Mayan 'Three Sisters' combination. The beans clamber up the corn stems and the courgettes (squashes can be used too) can

grow and spread before the corn becomes too big and shades them out. They must be planted in a block at about 45–60cm (18–24in) spacing in each direction, rather than in rows as they are wind-pollinated and if in a straight line, the wind can potentially blow all the pollen away from the waiting plants and you will have no cobs.

The cobs tend to be ready to pick when the tassels at their end turn dark brown but I test to see if they are ripe by carefully folding back the surrounding sheaths and squeezing the corn. If they secrete a milky juice, then they are ripe and can be picked.

I do not cut the cobs until the water in which they are to be cooked is on a rolling boil, then take them straight from garden to stove. My most recent crop was 'Doux Miner', an organic seed from France, and 'Swift' is also excellent.

A sweetcorn cob perfectly ripe and ready to eat. They say you should not pick the cobs until the water is already boiling, so as to capture their astonishing sweetness before it converts to starch.